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ABSTRACT

The study attempted to determine the effects of chronological age (CA), mental age (MA), IQ, sex, and the content of eight Aesop's Fables on the ability of 56 mentally handicapped children (26 boys, 30 girls: 7 to 18 years old) to interpret the stories' morals correctly. After reading the fables, which were chosen to illustrate the virtues of gratitude, prudence, cooperation, perseverance, honesty, foresight, resolution, and truth, the Ss' responses as to the morals of the fables were scored either plus or minus and were analyzed according to the type of explanation given. Results indicated that MA and IQ best predicted ability to interpret the morals correctly. The opposite was true for CA. Sex differences favored males. Vitues of truth and honesty were best understood while the values of prudence and foresight were least comprehended. (Author/SBH)

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THE EFFICIENCY OF FABLES IN DEVELOPING CONCEPTS OF MORALITY IN MENTALLY HANDICAPPED YOUTH

Paper presented at the XVII Interamerican Congress of Psychology

Lima, Peru, July, 1979

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Abstract

The study attempted to determine the effects of CA, MA, IQ, Sex, and the content of eight of Aesop's Fables on the ability of mentally handicapped youth to interpret their morals correctly. There were 56 subjects in all, 26 boys and 30 girls. The CA range was 7 to 18; MA range 5 to 16; and IQ range 55 to 112. The subjects attended St. Coletta's Day School in Braintree, Massachusetts. The school was nongraded and served mentally retarded and learning disabled children.

After reading the fables, which were chosen to illustrate the virtues of Gratitude, Prudence, Cooperation, Perseverance, Honesty, Foresight, Resolution and Truth, the subject's responses as to the morals of the fables were scored either plus or minus and were analyzed according to the type of explanation given. Incorrect explanations were categorized as Romancing, Antithetical, and Vague/None. Correct interpretations were denoted as Specific.

The results indicated that MA and IQ best predicted the ability of mentally handicapped youth to interpret the morals correctly. The opposite was true for CA. Sex differences favored males who gave significantly more correct responses than females.

The virtures of truth and honesty were best understood while the values of prudence and foresight were least comprehended. A 50 percent correct response rate was found for some subjects with MA's of 6, CA's of 10, and IQ's of 61 which suggests that some mildly retarded youth and children at primary school levels can indeed learn moral concepts from Aesop's Fables.

As mass media and modern travel expand the horizons of contemporary society, the world becomes less provincial and more sophisticated. The changing concepts of family life, religion, sex role behavior, racial issues, politics, and war are perplexing problems which require personal and social moral decision-making by today's children and teenagers.

Piaget (1965) postulated that morality was a developmental process which began in infancy. A child's set of values evolved from the respect which he acquired for a system of rules. Kohlberg's (1958) research has generally confirmed that of Piaget. He contends that the roots of a child's concepts of right and wrong develop through several sequential stages which follow each other in the same order in all cultures. Stage 1 consists of an obedience and punishment orientation; Stage 2 of self-serving opportunism; Stage 3 of "good boy" conformity; Stage 4 of doing one's duty; Stage 5 of majority will and welfare; and Stage 6, the highest level of moral development, of trust based on conscience and logical principles.

The stages are not rigid patterns. Environmental stimulation may increase or retard the rate of progress through each stage. As experimental factors heavily influence the rate of cognitive and moral development, child rearing practices, age, cultural mores, education, and intellectual factors affect moral behavior. Moral maturity is not the same as IQ although the two are correlated, therefore, it is possible for individuals who have attained the highest Piagetian cognitive stage of "formal operations" to make amoral judgments. Knowledge of moral values is not a determinant of moral behavior but the relationship tends to be positive.

It is assumed that the teaching of moral values is both a legitimate and fundamental responsibility of the family, the church, and the educator. Societies develop codes of conduct which are comprised of personal traits deemed virtuous by cultural consensus and which become the priniciples and rules of instruction. In ancient Babylon there was the Code of Hammurabi; in China the sayings of Confusius; in classical times Aristotelian logic and reasoning; and in Old England the codes of chivalry regulated the behaviors of the Knights of the Round Table. Today, one of the best known sets of traits is that promoted by the Boy Scouts.

The methods of moral education vary among disciplines. Analysis of abstract moral concepts is the typical modus operandi of philosophers; games, simulations, modeling, and reinforcement are procedures of the psychologist; parables are used by preachers, and parents and educators universally use children's literature often in the form of fairy tales or fables to guide moral development. Bruno Bettelheim (1976) in his recent book, "The Uses of Enchantment" stated, "When children are young, it is literature that promotes their ability to find meaning in their lives and to endow life in general with more meaning."

The fable, because of its brevity and drama, has a special appeal for children because, while they shun moralizing, they are drawn to morality. Jean de la Fontaine (1954) expressed their popularity as follows:

> Fables in sooth are not what they appear;
> Our moralists are mice, and such small deer.
> We yawn at sermons, but we gladly turn
> To moral tales, and so amused, we learn.

The anthropomorphic treatment of animals is a source of entertainment even in today's sophisticated world. Children are accustomed to a world of comic strips and animated cartoons in which beasts and men speak a common language. In fables animals are merely representative of different aspects of human nature - so that the lion stands for kingliness, the fox for cunning, the sheep for innocence and simplicity, etc. Fables seldom have more than three characters, and the plots are based on a single incident. While fables appear to be simple, they are conveying an abstract idea in relatively few words and afford shrewd observations on the behavior of man.

There is not total agreement among experts as to the cognitive level at which fables can be interpreted meaningfully. Some claim that their cheerful presentation of human weaknesses are recognizable to anyone, even the very young reader. Cathon et al (1974) used such fables as The Lion and the Mouse, The Boy Who Cried Wolf, and The Milkmaid and Her Pail successfully with Head Start and Preprimary groups. Bettelheim (1976) feels that the young child's most important experiences and reactions are largely subconscious and should remain so until he reaches a much more mature age and understanding. On the other hand Arbuthnot et al (1961) cautioned that because of the abstract, impersonal quality of fables, they do not appeal to small children and the obvious intention of teaching a moral lesson grows tiresome. With respect to the moral education of mentally handicapped individuals, a question arises as to whether the use of fables would be an effective means of instruction.

The purpose of the present study was to determine the effects of chronological age (CA), mental age (MA), intelligence level (IQ), sex and the content of the fable on the ability of mentally handicapped children to interpret the morals of Aesop's Fables.

METHOD

Subjects:

Children attending St. Coletta's Day School in Braintree, Massachusetts, were the subjects of the study. There were 56 subjects in all, 26 boys and 30 girls. The CA range was 7 to 18; MA range 5 to 16; and IQ range 55 to 112. The children were of mixed etiologies and from varied socioeconomic strata. The school was nongraded and served mentally retarded and learning disabled children.

Procedure:

Each subject was seen individually. The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT), Form A, was administered to determine verbal intellectual functioning. A woodprint copy depicting each of the fables was shown to the subject as the Examiner related eight fables. The fables chosen were intended to illustrate the virtues of Gratitude (The Lion and the Mouse), Prudence (The Belly and Its Members), Cooperation (The Four Oxen and the Lion), Perseverance (The Fox and the Grapes), Honesty (The Young Thief and His Mother), Foresight (The Milkmaid and Her Pail), Resolution (The Tortoise and the Hare), and Truth (The Boy Who Cried Wolf).

After each reading the subject was asked a series of questions to ascertain his understanding of the moral or lesson of the story. Responses were scored either plus or minus and were then analyzed according to the types of explanations given as to the moral the fable was supposed to teach. Incorrect interpretations were divided into three categories: Romancing, Antithetical, and Vague/None. Correct interpretations were denoted as Specific. For example, in the fable, The Tortoise and the Hare, a Romancing explanation might be, "The tortoise won because he had lots of dollars;" an Antithetical response, "He lay down and was snoring." A Specific

or correct response might be, "The tortoise won because the rabbit took a nap and he didn't."

RESULTS

Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the percent of correct interpretations of the morals of the fables at successive CA, MA, and IQ levels and by males and females. The number of subjects differed within groups as is shown by the figures in parentheses. An analysis of variance statistical design was applied to the data to measure the effects of the criterion variables on correct interpretations. An F value of 2.76 was needed to indicate a significant difference at the 95% level. Pearson product-moment correlational coefficients were also computed.

CA, MA, and IQ

The data show that increased CA did not have a significant effect on the ability of the subjects to give correct responses ($F = 1.2372$).

Increased MA had a positive and significant effect on correct interpretations ($F = 9.1479$), $P < .01$) as did increased IQ ($F = 10.8919$, $P < .01$).

Correlations between CA and Specific (correct) responses was not significant ($r = 0.17$). Between MA and Specific responses the correlation was highly significant ($r = 0.59$, $P < .00001$) as it was with IQ ($r = 0.55$, $P < .00001$).

Sex

Males gave significantly more correct responses than females ($F = 4.1259$, $P < .05$).

Tables 5, 6, 7, and 8 show the percent for each of four types of explanation given according to the criterion variables of CA, MA, IQ, and Sex.

CA, MA, and IQ

A negative but nonsignificant relationship was found between increased CA and Romancing and Antithetical types of explanations ($r = 0.0361$; $r = -0.2149$ respectively). Between increased CA and Vague/None incorrect explanations there was a slight positive relationship which was also nonsignificant ($r = 0.0377$).

As MA increased there was a tendency for incorrect types of explanations to decrease. Significant negative correlations were found between MA and Antithetical explanations ($r = -0.3886$, $P<.05$), and between MA and Vague/None responses ($r = -0.4336$, $P<.01$). There was a negative correlation between MA and Romancing explanations but not significantly so ($r = -0.1712$). The same was true for the correlation between IQ and Romancing explanations ($r = -0.0814$). Significant negative correlations were found between increased IQ and Antithetical responses ($r = -0.2135$, $P<.01$) and between increased IQ and Vague/None responses ($r = -0.5424$, $P<.01$).

Sex

Females gave significantly more Vague/None incorrect explanations than males ($F = 3.7124$, $P<.05$), but there were no significant differences in the number of Romancing and Antithetical responses given by males and females.

Content of the Fables

The morals of fables best to least understood overall were as follows:

1. Truth - The Boy Who Cried Wolf.
2. Honesty - The Young Thief and His Mother.

3. Resolution - The Tortoise and the Hare.
4. Gratitude - The Lion and the Mouse.
5. Cooperation - The Four Oxen and the Lion.
6. Perseverance - The Fox and the Grapes.
7. Prudence - The Belly and Its Members.
8. Foresight - The Milkmaid and Her Pail.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study indicated that the two variables which best predicted the ability of mentally handicapped youth to interpret correctly the morals of Aesop's Fables were MA and IQ. The opposite was true for CA which was found not to be a reliable predictor. Sex differences favored males who gave consistently and significantly more correct responses than females.

Whether the fables had humans or animals as lead characters seemed to have had no relationship to the facilitation of understanding. The two best understood and the two least understood fables depicted human behavior while the four in between had animals as lead characters.

The values of truth and honesty were best understood probably because lying and stealing are rather common childhood misdemeanors and emphasis is given to correction of such behaviors during the developmental period, both in the home and in the school. The virtues of prudence and foresight were least comprehended. They are abstract concepts which develop slowly, if at all, among mentally handicapped individuals and are, in fact, determiners of intellectual competency in the eyes of the law.

The present findings tend to be at variance with those of other researchers who have found positive correlations between moral judgment and CA (Stephens and Mahaney, 1974; Ozbek and Forehand, 1973) but are in agreement with Boehm (1966) who failed to find differences in moral judgment between younger and older retardates.

As MA and IQ are functionally related it is not surprising to find that both show a positive linear relationship with moral comprehension and development such as Piaget and Kohlberg postulated in their moral growth theories. However, there are great discrepancies between the CA's and MA's of the mentally handicapped. Unlike those of mentally normal individuals, an 18-year-old retardate may have a mental age of 6, or 12, or 15. It is therefore, the MA rather than the CA which better predicts cognitive and moral understanding levels.

The findings of sex differences in the moral interpretations of the fables seems attributable to the fact that males had a higher mean MA (9.6) than females (8.1).

The results seem to suggest that the developmental level at which Aesop's Fables can be used effectively to develop concepts of morality in mentally handicapped youth varies among individuals. A 50 percent correct response rate was found for some mentally handicapped youth with MA's of 6, CA's of 10, and IQ's of 61 which seems to indicate that some mildly retarded youth and children at primary school levels can indeed learn moral concepts from Aesop's Fables.

APPENDIX

TABLE 1

Percent of Correct Interpretations of Morals of Fables at Successive CA Levels (N = 56)

Type of Moral Value	Chronological Age 7 - 10 (7)	11 - 13 (18)	14 - 15 (14)	16 - 18 (17)
Gratitude	11	52	42	24
Prudence	11	7	16	35
Cooperation	23	21	27	38
Perseverance	23	45	21	24
Honesty	11	52	38	39
Foresight	0	21	16	25
Resolution	11	25	27	60
Truth	23	74	44	54

TABLE 2

Percent of Correct Interpretations of Morals of Fables at Successive MA Levels (N = 56)

Type of Moral Value	Mental Age 5 - 6 (11)	7 - 8 (20)	9 - 11 (14)	12 - 16 (11)
Gratitude	13	46	40	73
Prudence	13	4	23	70
Cooperation	4	25	34	77
Perseverance	13	25	45	73
Honesty	26	19	58	84
Foresight	0	9	17	86
Resolution	13	13	46	93
Truth	44	54	44	70

$P < .01$

TABLE 3

Percent of Correct Interpretations of Morals of Fables at Successive IQ Levels (N = 56)

Type of Moral Value	Intelligence Quotient 50 - 69 (23)	70 - 79 (16)	80 - 89 (12)	90 - 119 (5)
Gratitude	32	19	42	100
Prudence	9	19	25	44
Cooperation	3	25	42	67
Perseverance	22	19	33	100
Honesty	25	38	67	100
Foresight	3	6	42	67
Resolution	9	50	58	67
Truth	45	50	75	100

$P < .01$

TABLE 4

Percent of Correct Interpretations of Morals of Fables by Sex (N = 56)

Type of Moral Value	Sex Female (30)	Male (26)
Gratitude	37	40
Prudence	20	23
Cooperation	27	35
Perseverance	23	27
Honesty	40	50
Foresight	14	27
Resolution	23	54
Truth	47	73

$P < .05$

TABLE 5

Percent for Each of Four Types of Explanation Given at Successive CA Levels (N = 56)

Type of Explanation Given	Chronological Age 7 - 10 (7)	11 - 13 (18)	14 - 15 (14)	16 - 18 (17)
Romancing [a]	27	13	11	21
Antithetical [a]	42	18	22	9
Vague/None [a]	32	29	34	27
Specific [b]	14	43	34	43

[a] = Incorrect interpretation.

[b] = Correct interpretation.

TABLE 6

Percent for Each of Four Types of Explanation Given at Successive MA Levels (N = 56)

Type of Explanation Given	Mental Age 5 - 6 (11)	7 - 8 (20)	9 - 11 (14)	12 - 16 (11)
Romancing [a]	22	11	13	8
Antithetical [a]	25	22	15	2 *
Vague/None [a]	39	37	25	7 **
Specific [b]	16	32	47	84 ***

[a] = Incorrect interpretation.

[b] = Correct interpretation.

*** $P < .00001$

** $P \leq .01$

* $P < .05$

TABLE 7

Percent for Each of Four Types of Explanation Given at Successive IQ Levels (N = 56)

Type of Explanation Given	Intelligence Quotient 50 - 69 (23)	70 - 79 (16)	80 - 89 (12)	90 - 119 (5)	
Romancing [a]	13	20	13	0	
Antithetical [a]	22	20	17	0	*
Vague/None [a]	42	27	20	12	**
Specific [b]	25	33	50	82	***

[a] = Incorrect interpretation.

[b] = Correct interpretation.

*** P < .00001
** P < .01
* P < .01

TABLE 8

Percent of Each of Four Types of Explanation Given by Females and Males (N = 56)

Type of Explanation Given	Sex Female (30)	Male (26)	
Romancing [a]	15	14	
Antithetical [a]	20	15	
Vague/None [a]	33	23	*
Specific [b]	32	48	

[a] = Incorrect Explanation.

[b] = Correct Explanation.

* P < .05

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